

*We should all refrain  
from the mania of celebrating  
personalities, and busying  
ourselves with biographical  
trivialities.*



## *Abstract and train of thoughts*

### **Samuel Taylor Coleridge on why we should all refrain from the mania of celebrating personalities.**

Voluminous biographical trivialities render the real character almost invisible, like the counterfeit frankincense which smoke-blacks the favourite idol of a Catholic Church. 3

To scribble trifles on the glass of an inn window is the mark of an idler; but to engrave them on the marble monument, sacred to the memory of the departed Great, is something worse than idleness. 4

As insignificant stories derive no real respectability from the eminence of the person who happens to be the subject of them, they are apt to have their insipidity seasoned by the same bad passions that accompany the habit of gossiping in general. And the misapprehensions of weak men meeting with the misinterpretations of malignant men, have often formed the groundwork of the most grievous calumnies. 4

The duty of an honest biographer is to portray the prominent imperfections as well as excellencies of his subject. But this is not an excuse for heaping together a multitude of particulars, which can prove nothing of any man that might not have been taken for granted of all men. 5

In the present age, of celebrating the personality, we should all desist from this mania of busying ourselves with the names of others, which is still more alarming as a symptom than it is troublesome as a disease. 5

It is worse than a crime to inflict upon the mind vulgar scandal and personal anxiety, thus polluting with evil passions the very sanctuary to which we should flee for refuge from them! 5

### **Roger North's biography of Lord Chief Justice Saunders.**

Very corpulent and beastly, a mere lump of morbid flesh. Those whose ill fortune it was to stand near him were confessors, and in summer time almost martyrs. He seldom moved without a parcel of youths hanging about him, revelling and jesting with them. But he had a goodness of nature and disposition in such a great a degree, that he may be deservedly styled a true Philanthropist. 7

### **Suggested reading for students.**

Selections from our Down to Earth Series. 10



## Samuel Taylor Coleridge on why we should all refrain from the mania of celebrating personalities.

**Voluminous biographical trivialities render the real character almost invisible, like the counterfeit frankincense which smoke-blacks the favourite idol of a Catholic Church.**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend: a series of essays to aid the formation of fixed principles in politics, morals and religion, with literary amusements interspersed*. London: G. Bell, 1875; 389pp. The Second Landing-Place: or essays interposed for amusement, retrospect, and preparation (Miscellany the Second) Essay II, pp. 312-18, from the 1<sup>st</sup> American Edition, reprinted from the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Edition, Burlington [Vt.]: Chauncey Goodrich, 1831; 510pp

The History of Times represented the magnitude of actions and the *public* faces or deportment of persons, and passeth over in silence the smaller passages and motions of men and matters. But such being the workmanship of God, that he doth hang the greatest weight upon the smallest wires, *maxima e minimis suspendens*:<sup>1</sup> it comes therefore to pass, that Histories do rather set forth the pomp of business than the true and inward resorts thereof. But Lives, if they be well written, *propounding to themselves a person to represent* in whom actions both greater and smaller, public and private, have a commixture, must of necessity contain a more true, native, and lively representation.

— LORD BACON

Mankind in general are so little in the habit of looking steadily at their own meaning, or of weighing the words by which they express it, that the writer, who is careful to do both, will sometimes mislead his readers through the very excellence which qualifies him to be their instructor; and this with no other fault on his part, than the modest mistake of supposing in those, to whom he addresses himself, an intellect as watchful as his own. The inattentive Reader adopts as unconditionally true, or perhaps rails at his Author for having stated as such, what upon examination would be found to have been duly limited, and would so have been understood, if opaque spots and false refractions were as rare in the mental as in the bodily eye. The motto, for instance, to this Paper has more than once served as an excuse and authority for huge volumes of biographical minutiae, which render the real character almost invisible, like clouds of dust on a portrait, or the counterfeit frankincense which smoke-blacks the favourite idol of a Catholic village. Yet Lord Bacon, by the words which I have marked in italics, evidently confines the Biographer to such facts as are either

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<sup>1</sup> [The largest suspending the smallest.]

susceptible of some useful general inference, or tend to illustrate those qualities which distinguished the subject of them from ordinary men; while the passage in general was meant to guard the Historian against considering as trifles, all that might appear so to those who recognize no greatness in the *mind*, and can conceive no dignity in any incident which does not act on their senses by its external accompaniments, or on their curiosity by its immediate consequences. Things apparently insignificant are recommended to our notice, not for their own sakes, but for their bearings or influences on things of importance: in other words, when they are insignificant in appearance only.

**To scribble trifles on the glass of an inn window is the mark of an idler; but to engrave them on the marble monument, sacred to the memory of the departed Great, is something worse than idleness.**

An inquisitiveness into the minutest circumstances, and casual sayings of eminent contemporaries, is indeed quite *natural*; but so are all our follies, and the more natural they are, the more caution should we exert in guarding against them. To scribble trifles even on the perishable glass of an inn window, is the mark of an idler; but to engrave them on the marble monument, sacred to the memory of the departed Great, is something worse than idleness. The spirit of genuine Biography is in nothing more conspicuous than in the firmness with which it withstands the cravings of worthless curiosity, as distinguished from the thirst after utter useful knowledge.

**As insignificant stories derive no real respectability from the eminence of the person who happens to be the subject of them, they are apt to have their insipidity seasoned by the same bad passions that accompany the habit of gossiping in general. And the misapprehensions of weak men meeting with the misinterpretations of malignant men, have often formed the groundwork of the most grievous calumnies.**

① For, in the first place, such anecdotes as derive their whole and sole interest from the great name of the person concerning whom they are related, and neither illustrate his general character nor his particular actions, would scarcely have been noticed or remembered except by men of weak minds: it is not unlikely, therefore, that they were misapprehended at the time, and it is most probable that they have been related as incorrectly as they were noticed injudiciously. Nor are the consequences of such garrulous Biography merely negative. For as insignificant stories can derive no real respectability from the eminence of the person who happens to be the subject of them, but rather an additional deformity of disproportion, they are apt to have their insipidity seasoned by the same bad passions that accompany the habit of gossiping in general; and the misapprehensions of weak men meeting with the misinterpretations of malignant men, have not seldom formed the groundwork of the most grievous calumnies. →

**The duty of an honest biographer is to portray the prominent imperfections as well as excellencies of his subject. But this is not an excuse for heaping together a multitude of particulars, which can prove nothing of any man that might not have been taken for granted of all men.**

**In the present age, of celebrating the personality, we should all desist from this mania of busying ourselves with the names of others, which is still more alarming as a symptom than it is troublesome as a disease.**

**It is worse than a crime to inflict upon the mind vulgar scandal and personal anxiety, thus polluting with evil passions the very sanctuary to which we should flee for refuge from them!**

② In the second place, these trifles are subversive of the great end of Biography, which is to fix the attention, and to interest the feelings, of men on those qualities and actions which have made a particular life worthy of being recorded. It is, no doubt, the duty of an honest Biographer, to portray the prominent imperfections as well as excellencies of his Hero; but I am at a loss to conceive how this can be deemed an excuse for heaping together a multitude of particulars, which can prove nothing of any man that might not have been safely taken for granted of all men. In the present age (emphatically the age of personality!) there are more than ordinary motives for withholding all encouragement from this mania of busying ourselves with the names of others, which is still more alarming as a symptom than it is troublesome as a disease. The Reader must be still less acquainted with contemporary literature than myself — a case not likely to occur — if he needs *me* to inform him, that there are men, who trading in the silliest anecdotes, in unprovoked abuse and senseless eulogy, think themselves nevertheless employed both worthily and honourably, if only all this be done “*in good set terms*,” and from the press, and of *public* characters: a class which has increased so rapidly of late, that it becomes difficult to discover what characters are to be considered as private. Alas! if these wretched misusers of language, and the means of giving wings to thought, the means of multiplying the presence of an individual mind, had ever known, how great a thing the possession of any one simple truth is, and how mean a thing a mere fact is, except as seen in the light of some comprehensive truth; if they had but once experienced the un-borrowed complacency, the inward independence, the home-bred strength, with which every clear conception of the reason is accompanied; they would shrink from their own pages as at the remembrance of a crime. For a crime it is<sup>1</sup> thus to introduce the spirit of vulgar scandal and personal inquietude into the Closet and the Library, environing with evil passions the very Sanctuaries, to which we should flee for refuge from them! For to what do these Publications appeal, whether they present themselves as Biography or as anonymous Criticism, but to the same feelings which the scandal-bearers and time-killers of ordinary life seek to gratify in themselves and their listeners? And both the authors and admirers of such publications, in what respect are they less truants and deserters from their own hearts, and from their appointed task of understanding and amending them, than the most garrulous female

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<sup>1</sup> And the man who hesitates in pronouncing it such, must be ignorant of what mankind owe to books, what he himself owes to them in spite of his ignorance.



Chronicler of the goings-on of yesterday in the families of her neighbours and townsfolk?

*The Friend* has reprinted the following Biographical sketch, partly indeed in the hope that it may be the means of introducing to the Reader's knowledge, in case he should not have formed an acquaintance with them already, two of the most interesting biographical Works in our language, both for the weight of the matter, and the in *curiosa felicitas*<sup>1</sup> of the style. I refer to Roger North's<sup>2</sup> Examen, and the Life of his brother, the Lord Chancellor North. The pages are all alive with the genuine idioms of our mother-tongue.

A fastidious taste, it is true, will find offence in the occasional vulgarisms, or what we now call *slang*, which not a few of our writers, shortly after the restoration of Charles the Second, seem to have affected as a mark of loyalty. These instances, however, are but a trifling drawback. They are not *sought for*, as is too often and too plainly done by L'Estrange, Collyer, Tom Brown, and their imitations. North never goes out of his way either to seek them or to avoid them; and in the main his language gives us the very nerve, pulse, and sinew of a hearty, healthy, conversational *English*.

This is *The Friend's* first reason for the insertion of this Extract. His other and principal motive may be found in the kindly good-tempered spirit of the passage. But instead of troubling the Reader with the painful contrast which so many recollections force on my own feelings, I will refer the character-makers of the present day to the Letters of Erasmus and Sir Thomas More to Martin Dorpius, that are commonly annexed to the *Encomium Moriae*;<sup>3</sup> and then for a practical comment on the just and affecting sentiments of these two great men, to the works of Roger North, as proofs how alone an English scholar and gentleman will permit himself to delineate his contemporaries even under the strongest prejudices of party spirit, and though employed on the coarsest subjects. A coarser subject than L.C.J. Saunders cannot well be imagined; nor does North use his colours with a sparing or very delicate hand. And yet the final impression is that of kindness.



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<sup>1</sup> [studied felicity of expression]

<sup>2</sup> [Roger North KC, 1653–1734, English lawyer, biographer, and amateur musician.]

<sup>3</sup> [*In Praise of Folly*, an essay written 1509, by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.]

## Roger North's biography of Lord Chief Justice Saunders.<sup>1</sup>

**Very corpulent and beastly, a mere lump of morbid flesh. Those whose ill fortune it was to stand near him were confessors, and in summer time almost martyrs. He seldom moved without a parcel of youths hanging about him, revelling and jesting with them. But he had a goodness of nature and disposition in such a great a degree, that he may be deservedly styled a true Philanthropist.**



The Lord Chief Justice Saunders succeeded in the room of Pemberton. His character, and his beginning were equally strange. He was at first no better than a poor boy, if not a parish-fundling, without knowing parents or relations. He had found a way to live by obsequiousness in Clement's Inn, as I remember, and courting the attorneys' clerks for scraps. The extraordinary observance and diligence of the boy, made the society willing to do him good. He appeared very ambitious to learn to write, and one of the attorneys got a board knocked up at a window on the top of a staircase; and that was his desk, where he sat and wrote after

copies of court, and other hands the clerks gave him. He made himself so expert a writer that he took in business, and earned some pence by hackney-writing. And thus by degrees he pushed his faculties and fell to forms, and by books that were lent him became an exquisite entertaining clerk; and by the same course of improvement of himself, an able counsel, first in special pleading, then at large; and after he was called to the Bar, had practice in the King's Bench Court equal with any there. As to his person he was very corpulent and beastly, a mere lump of morbid flesh. He used to say, by his *troggs* (such an humorous way of talking he affected), none could say he wanted issue of his body, for he had nine in his back. He was a fetid mass, that offended his neighbours at the bar in the sharpest degree. Those whose ill fortune it was to stand near him, were confessors, and in summer time almost martyrs. This hateful decay of his carcase came upon him by continual sottishness; for to say nothing of brandy, he was seldom without a pot of ale at his nose, or near him. That exercise was all he used; the rest of his life was sitting at his desk or piping at home; and that home was a tailor's house in Butcher Row, called his lodging, and the man's wife was his nurse or worse; but by virtue of his money, of which he made little account, though he got a great deal, he soon became master of the family; and being no changeling he never removed, but was true to his friends, and they to him, to the last hour of his life. So much for his person and education. As for his parts none had them more lively than he; wit and repartee in an affected rusticity were natural to him. He was ever ready and never at a

<sup>1</sup> [Extract]

loss; and none came so near as he to be a match for Sergeant Maynard. His great dexterity was in the art of special pleading, and he would lay snares that often caught his superiors who were not aware of his traps. And he was so fond of success for his clients, that rather than fail, he would set the court hard with a trick; for which he met, sometimes, with a reprimand which he would ward off, so that no one was much offended with him. But Hales could not bear his irregularity of life; and for that, and suspicion of his tricks, used to bear hard upon him in the court. But no ill-usage from the bench was too hard for his hold of business, being such as scarce any could do but himself. With all this he had a goodness of nature and disposition in so great a degree, that he may be deservedly styled a Philanthrope. He was a very Silenus<sup>1</sup> to the boys, as in this place I may term the students of the law, to make them merry whenever they had a mind to it. He had nothing of rigid or austere in him. If any near him at the bar grumbled at his stench, he ever converted the complaint into content and laughing with the abundance of his wit. As to his ordinary dealing, he was as honest as the driven snow was white; and why not, having no regard for money, or desire to be rich? And for good nature and condescension there was not his fellow. I have seen him for hours and half-hours together, before the court sat, stand at the bar, with an audience of students over against him, putting of cases, and debating so as suited their capacities, and encouraged their industry. And so in the Temple, he seldom moved without a parcel of youths hanging about him, and he merry and jesting with them.

It will be readily conceived that this man was never cut out to lie a Presbyter, or anything that is severe and crabbed. In no time did he lean to faction, but did his business without offence to any. He put off officious talk of government or politics with jests, and so made his wit a catholicon or shield to cover all his weak places or infirmities. When the court fell into a steady course of using the law against all kinds of offenders, this man was taken into the king's business; and had the part of drawing, and perusal of almost all indictments and informations that were then to be prosecuted, with the pleadings thereon, if any were special; and he had the settling of the large pleadings in the *quo Warranto*<sup>2</sup> against London. His Lordship had no sort of conversation with him but in the way of business and at the bar; but once, after he was in the king's business, he dined with his Lordship, and no more. And there he showed another qualification he had acquired, and that was to play jigs upon a harpsichord; having taught himself with the opportunity of an old virginal of his landlady's; but in such a manner, not for defect, but figure, as to see him were a jest. The king observing him to be of a free disposition, loyal, friendly, and without greediness or guile, thought of him to be the Chief Justice of the King's Bench at that nice time. And the ministry could not but approve of it. So great a weight was then at stake, as could not be trusted to men of doubtful principles, or such as anything might tempt to desert them. While he sat in the Court of King's

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<sup>1</sup> [Companion and tutor to the wine god Dionysus, presiding over daimones and is related to musical creativity, prophetic ecstasy, drunken joy, drunken dances and gestures.]

<sup>2</sup> [A prerogative writ requiring the person to whom it is directed to show what authority they have for exercising some right, power, or franchise they claim to hold.]



Bench, he gave the rule to the general satisfaction of the lawyers. But his course of life was so different from what it had been, his business incessant and withal crabbed; and his diet and exercise changed, that the constitution of his body, or head rather, could not sustain it, and he fell into an apoplexy and palsy, which numbed his parts; and he never recovered the strength of them. He outlived the judgment in the *quo Warranto*; but was not present otherwise than by sending his opinion by one of the judges, to be for the king, who at the pronouncing of the judgment, declared it to the court accordingly, which is frequently done in like cases.



## Suggested reading for students.



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- EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING IS INTERRELATED
- FLESH-EATING AMONG BUDDHIST MONKS
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- HOW TO CONDUCT OURSELVES TOWARDS OUR PARENTS
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- MIRACLES ARE NATURAL PHENOMENA
- MODERN INDIA IS SPIRITUALLY DEGRADED
- MUSINGS OF AN UNPOPULAR PHILOSOPHER
- NARCISSISM AND ANIMAL SENSUALISM PERSONIFIED
- OCCULT PROPHECIES
- OCCULT TALES BY JUDGE
- ONIONS WERE CONSIDERED TOO SACRED TO BE EATEN
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- PROMETHEUS, THE LIGHT-BRINGER, HURLED DOWN TO THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH
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- THE HOLLOW EARTH
- THE JAPANESE SHOULD NOT BOW DOWN TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS
- THE LEARNED TREE OF TIBET
- THE OCCULT CAUSES OF EPIDEMIC DISEASES
- THE RELIGIO-PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL IS NEITHER RELIGIOUS NOR PHILOSOPHICAL
- THE RUSSIAN MOTE AND THE BRITISH BEAM
- THE SEWER OF DOGMATIC CREEDS AND BLIND FAITH
- THE SPARKLE OF “LIGHT ON THE PATH” HAS BEEN DIMMED BY A DARK STAIN
- THE SPIRIT OF LIFE ISSUES FROM THE EARTH’S NORTH POLE
- THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL NEVER EXISTED
- THE UNGRATEFUL MAN
- THE VELVETEEN RABBIT
- TRUTH IS EXILED FROM THE PRESS BECAUSE IT IS NOT AS BEGUILING AS FALSEHOOD
- VIRGIL'S GEORGICS - TR. RHOADES
- WESTERN RELIGION ALONE IS TO BLAME FOR THE CRUELTY TO ANIMALS
- WHAT IS MUSIC BY RICE
- WHEN THE DOORS OF THE WORLD CLOSED ON THEM
- WHY DO ANIMALS SUFFER
- WHY THE HOLLOW MEN PRIZE THEIR VICE

